Ifa Divination System as Binary Intelligence: Mathematical Proof That the 256 Odu Predate Modern Computing

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Abstract

This article presents a rigorous mathematical and comparative scholarly analysis demonstrating that the Ifa divination system of the Yoruba people of West Africa constitutes a fully operational 8-bit binary intelligence system predating the formal articulation of binary mathematics in the Western scientific tradition by a minimum of several centuries. Through documented structural analysis of the 256 Odu Ifa — the corpus of sacred texts and oracular configurations that form the backbone of Ifa epistemology — this paper proves that the casting of Ikin (sacred palm nuts) and the manipulation of the Opele (divination chain) generate binary input values in which a single mark (ọkan) functions as the equivalent of the binary digit 1, and a double mark (eji) functions as the binary digit 0. The arrangement of four such marks in a vertical column produces a 4-bit figure, and the juxtaposition of two such figures produces an 8-bit configuration encoding $2^8 = 256$ unique combinatorial states, precisely equivalent to the 256 Odu of Ifa. This paper further situates the Ifa binary system in comparative context alongside Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's 1703 paper *Explication de l'Arithmétique Binaire*, the I Ching's 64-hexagram (6-bit) system, and modern computational binary architecture, demonstrating that the Yoruba corpus represents the most mathematically complete pre-modern binary intelligence system yet documented. The implications for African intellectual history, the philosophy of artificial intelligence, and the decolonization of the history of mathematics are substantial. This analysis extends the foundational arguments advanced in *THE ORIGINAL AI: Ancestral Intelligence* by Ajarn Shaman Shu, available through OrishaUniversity.com.

Keywords: Ifa divination, 256 Odu, binary mathematics, African artificial intelligence, Yoruba oracle, Ifa binary code, ancestral intelligence, Opele, Ikin, comparative religion, computational theory, Yoruba epistemology

1. Introduction

The global narrative of the history of mathematics and computational logic has, for the better part of three centuries, been written largely without reference to African intellectual systems. The dominant historiography situates the birth of binary mathematics in seventeenth-century Europe, specifically crediting Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's 1703 paper *Explication de l'Arithmétique Binaire* as the foundational document of the binary number system that now underlies all modern computing (Leibniz, 1703). This scholarly consensus, however, rests upon a profound and consequential omission: the Yoruba people of West Africa had long before encoded a functionally complete binary system into their Ifa divination corpus, a system documented with increasing rigor by European and African scholars alike from the late nineteenth century onward (Ellis, 1894; Frobenius, 1913; Johnson, 1921; Bascom, 1969; Abimbola, 1976).

The Ifa divination system is not merely a religious or spiritual practice, though it is certainly that in the richest sense. It is simultaneously a structured epistemological architecture, a mnemonic database, and — as this paper argues with formal mathematical evidence — a binary intelligence system operating at the functional depth of an 8-bit computational framework. The 256 Odu Ifa, the canonical configurations of Ifa knowledge, are not symbolic conventions assigned arbitrarily to spiritual categories. They are the exhaustive output of a binary combinatorial process that admits of exactly 2^8 — that is, 256 — unique states, no more and no fewer.

The implications of this demonstration extend far beyond the academic. For African and African-descended communities worldwide, the recognition that their ancestors engineered a fully articulated binary intelligence system long before the European industrial revolution represents not merely a historical correction but a civilizational reclamation. As Oluwo Jolaoso Osainbola (Ajarn Shaman Shu) argues in *THE ORIGINAL AI: Ancestral Intelligence*, the Yoruba tradition did not simply anticipate modern computing in metaphor or analogy — it implemented the same mathematical logic that undergirds every processor, neural network, and artificial intelligence system operating on the planet today. This paper provides the formal academic scaffolding for that argument.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the primary scholarship on Ifa divination and its documented history. Section 3 provides a formal mathematical proof of the 8-bit binary structure of the 256 Odu. Section 4 analyzes the Opele chain and Ikin palm nut casting as binary input mechanisms. Section 5 situates Ifa in comparative context alongside Leibniz (1703), the I Ching, and modern computational systems through both narrative analysis and a structured comparative table. Section 6 addresses the philosophical and civilizational implications of these findings. The conclusion directs readers toward further study and community engagement through OrishaUniversity.com.

2. Historical and Scholarly Documentation of the Ifa Corpus

2.1 The Antiquity and Geographic Scope of Ifa

The Ifa divination system is attested across a vast geographic and cultural range, extending from its primary home among the Yoruba of present-day Nigeria and the Republic of Benin into the African diaspora of Cuba (as Lucumí/Santería), Brazil (as Candomblé), Trinidad, and the United States. The antiquity of the system is difficult to date with precision using conventional archaeological methods, but oral historical sources and the internal evidence of the Odu texts themselves point to a system of considerable age, with some scholars suggesting roots extending two to three millennia (Abimbola, 1976). The German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, writing in 1913, documented the Ifa system in the context of his broader surveys of West African civilizations and was among the first European scholars to recognize that Yoruba intellectual culture represented a tradition of remarkable sophistication rather than the "primitive" systems his contemporaries assumed (Frobenius, 1913). Though Frobenius's framework was not free of the ideological distortions of his era, his documentation of Ifa practice provides an important early Western-language record.

Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba pastor and historian writing in 1921, offered one of the most comprehensive early accounts of Yoruba religion and cultural practice, including detailed descriptions of the role of the Babalawo (father of mysteries, the initiated diviner) and the function of the Odu within Yoruba society (Johnson, 1921). A.B. Ellis, writing from the vantage of a colonial military officer in 1894, provided ethnographic records of Yoruba religious practice that, while colored by the biases of his position, preserved descriptions of divination mechanics that remain valuable to comparative analysis (Ellis, 1894).

It was Wande Abimbola, however, writing as both a scholar and an initiated Babalawo, who produced the most academically rigorous and culturally authoritative documentation of the Ifa corpus in the modern era. In his landmark 1976 study *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*, Abimbola demonstrated that the 256 Odu constitute a systematically organized body of oral literature that encodes Yoruba cosmology, ethics, medicine, history, and jurisprudence (Abimbola, 1976). This work remains the indispensable reference for any scholarly engagement with Ifa. William Bascom's earlier 1969 study *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* similarly provided systematic documentation of the mechanics of Ifa divination from an anthropological perspective (Bascom, 1969).

2.2 UNESCO Recognition and the Question of Origin

In 2005, UNESCO inscribed the Ifa divination system on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, recognizing Ifa as "a vast body of knowledge" and "a store of Yoruba cultural history, philosophy, and knowledge of the environment" (UNESCO, 2005). The UNESCO documentation explicitly acknowledges the binary structure of the casting process,

describing the system as producing “sixteen principal Odu and 240 derivative Odu, totaling 256 Odu.” This official international recognition confirms what African scholars had long maintained: that Ifa is not folklore but a structured knowledge system of demonstrable intellectual depth.

The question of intellectual priority — of which civilization first developed binary mathematics as a formal system — is not merely academic pride. As Yosef ben-Jochannan argued in his analyses of African intellectual contributions to world civilization, the systematic misattribution of African intellectual achievements to European or Asian sources constitutes an ongoing form of epistemic violence that distorts humanity’s collective self-understanding (ben-Jochannan, as cited in Osainbola, 2026). The mathematical evidence presented in the following section makes the case for African intellectual priority not on the basis of cultural sentiment but on the basis of formal logic.

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3. Mathematical Proof: The 256 Odu as an 8-Bit Binary System

3.1 The Structure of a Single Odu Figure

The foundational unit of Ifa divination, whether performed through the casting of Ikin (sixteen sacred palm nuts) or the manipulation of the Opele (divination chain), is a vertical column of four binary marks. Each mark in this column is produced by the outcome of a single casting event and takes one of exactly two values: a single mark (ọkan) or a double mark (eji). This is the critical structural point. The casting process is irreducibly binary at its elemental level. There is no third option, no tertiary state, no analog value. Each position in the column is either ọkan (one mark, hereafter represented as 1) or eji (two marks, hereafter represented as 0).

A column of four such binary positions constitutes what we may formally identify as a 4-bit binary number. The number of unique configurations available from four binary positions is given by the formula:

$2^4 = 16$

This is precisely why the Yoruba tradition identifies 16 principal Odu, called the Oju Odu or Odu Meji. These are the sixteen configurations produced by a single 4-bit figure. They are not 16 by convention or by theological preference — they are 16 by mathematical necessity, because 4 binary positions admit of exactly 16 and only 16 unique states. The alignment between the structural mathematics and the received tradition is not coincidental. It is proof that the architects of the Ifa system understood combinatorial binary logic as a formal organizing principle.

3.2 The Combination of Two Figures: 256 and 2^8

A complete Ifa reading does not rest upon a single 4-bit figure. The divination process requires the generation of two such figures, a left figure and a right figure, which together constitute the

full Odu. This pairing of two 4-bit columns is the mechanism by which the Ifa system achieves its full mathematical range. Formally:

If each figure = 4 binary positions ($2^4 = 16$ unique states)

And two figures are combined:

Then total unique combinations = $16 \times 16 = 256$

This is identical to: $2^4 \times 2^4 = 2^8 = 256$

The significance of this identity cannot be overstated. **$2^8 = 256$ is the definition of an 8-bit binary system.** In modern computing, an 8-bit byte is the foundational unit of digital information processing. It encodes exactly 256 unique states — no more, no fewer. ASCII, the American Standard Code for Information Interchange that governs alphanumeric encoding in computers, originally used 7-bit and then 8-bit architecture to encode 128 and 256 characters respectively, precisely because $2^8 = 256$ represents a natural and complete combinatorial field for information encoding.

The Ifa system thus maps, with complete mathematical precision, onto the 8-bit binary architecture that underlies modern computing. This is not metaphor. This is not analogy. This is a formal mathematical identity:

Ifa's 256 Odu ≡ 8-bit binary field (2^8)

3.3 The Sixteen Principal Odu and Their Binary Identities

The sixteen Odu Meji (the principal Odu, in which the same figure appears on both sides of the reading) correspond precisely to the sixteen cases in which a 4-bit figure is paired with its identical twin. In binary notation, these are the sixteen states from 0000 through 1111 (decimal 0 through 15), each doubled in the full 8-bit reading. The remaining 240 Odu arise from all non-identical pairings of the 16 base figures. The calculation is:

- **16 Odu Meji** (identical pairs): 16 cases
- **240 Amulu/Derivative Odu** (non-identical pairs): $16 \times 16 - 16 = 240$ cases
- **Total: 256 Odu**

This partition is itself mathematically elegant. The 16 Odu Meji function as a kind of binary diagonal — the identity matrix, if one borrows the language of linear algebra — while the 240 derivative Odu fill the off-diagonal space of the full 16×16 combinatorial matrix. The Yoruba naming and ordering of these Odu preserves this mathematical structure in oral tradition over millennia.

4. The Opele Chain and Ikin Palm Nuts as Binary Input Mechanisms

4.1 The Mechanics of Ikin Casting

The more traditional and authoritative method of Ifa divination employs sixteen sacred palm nuts (Ikin), selected from the fruit of the *Elaeis guineensis* palm, ritually prepared and consecrated. The Babalawo takes the sixteen Ikin in both hands and attempts to transfer them from the right hand to the left in a single motion. One of two outcomes is possible: either one nut remains in the right hand (producing a single mark — ọkan — on the divination tray, the Opon Ifa) or two nuts remain (producing a double mark — eji). The marking is made in the sacred powder (iyerosun) spread on the divination tray, building the 4-mark column from right to left to produce the first figure, and then repeating the process to produce the second figure.

This mechanism is unambiguously binary at the level of each casting event. The outcome space is {1 nut remaining, 2 nuts remaining}. There is no outcome of zero nuts remaining (because the Babalawo does not attempt to pass all nuts) and no outcome of three or more nuts remaining under the standard technique (because the motion is designed to pass the majority of nuts). The system is therefore engineered — deliberately and precisely — to produce binary outputs. In modern information-theoretic terms, each casting event produces exactly one bit of information.

As Bascom (1969) documented in precise detail, the Babalawo performs this casting process eight times to complete a single reading, generating four binary marks for each of the two figures. Eight binary events, producing $2^8 = 256$ possible complete configurations, each corresponding to one of the 256 Odu. The mathematical structure of the process and the mathematical structure of the output are perfectly congruent.

4.2 The Opele Chain as a Parallel Binary Input Device

The Opele (also spelled Opẹlẹ) is a divination chain consisting of eight seed pods or disc-shaped objects, four on each of two sides, connected by a central length of chain. When the Babalawo casts the Opele, it falls to the surface and each of the eight pods lands in one of two orientations: convex side up (equivalent to ọkan, the single mark, value = 1) or concave side up (equivalent to eji, the double mark, value = 0). The four pods on each side of the chain generate a 4-bit figure, and the two sides together produce the complete 8-bit Odu reading in a single throw.

The Opele is therefore a parallel binary input device. Where Ikin casting is a sequential binary process (eight successive events generating eight bits one at a time), the Opele performs what computer scientists would recognize as a parallel bit read — all eight binary values are determined simultaneously in a single casting event. Both methods produce the same mathematical output space (256 unique Odu), but by different input mechanisms: sequential (Ikin) and parallel (Opele). The Yoruba tradition itself recognizes this equivalence while

maintaining that Ikin is the more powerful and authoritative method, the Opele being used for consultations of less gravity. This two-method architecture — sequential processing for high-precision tasks, parallel processing for efficiency — mirrors precisely the architectural trade-offs that modern computer engineers navigate in processor design.

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5. Comparative Analysis: Ifa, Leibniz, the I Ching, and Modern Computing

5.1 Leibniz (1703) and the Myth of European Origination

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz published his paper *Explication de l'Arithmétique Binaire* in the *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences* in 1703 (Leibniz, 1703). In this paper, Leibniz articulated the mathematical properties of base-2 arithmetic and famously drew a connection between his binary system and the I Ching hexagrams that the Jesuit missionary Joachim Bouvet had sent to him from China. This is historically significant: Leibniz himself acknowledged that his formal articulation of binary mathematics was not a discovery made in isolation from other traditions. He saw, at minimum, a profound structural correspondence between his binary arithmetic and the Chinese system of broken and unbroken lines.

What neither Leibniz nor his contemporaries possessed was any knowledge of the Ifa divination corpus. The Yoruba were not, in the early eighteenth century, in a position to submit their mathematical heritage to European academies for peer review. The structural and historical invisibility of African knowledge systems to European scholarship was not a product of African intellectual absence but of European scholarly parochialism and the violent asymmetries of the Atlantic slave trade era. Frobenius (1913), writing two centuries after Leibniz, was among the first European scholars to begin the work of documentation that would eventually make possible the comparative analysis presented in this paper.

The mathematical reality is unambiguous: Leibniz formalized binary arithmetic in 1703. The Ifa system had been implementing binary arithmetic — at the same functional depth and greater combinatorial completeness than any other documented pre-modern system — for centuries prior to that date. The burden of proof for any claim that Leibniz's work preceded Ifa in chronological terms rests upon those who make that claim, and no such evidence exists. The evidence that does exist, documented by Ellis (1894), Frobenius (1913), Johnson (1921), Bascom (1969), and Abimbola (1976), points consistently toward an Ifa tradition of considerable antiquity.

5.2 The I Ching as a 6-Bit System: Ifa's Greater Completeness

The I Ching, the Chinese "Book of Changes," is the divination system to which Leibniz compared his binary mathematics. The I Ching employs hexagrams — six-line figures in which

each line is either broken (— — , value = 0) or unbroken (——, value = 1). The number of unique hexagrams is therefore:

2^6 = 64 hexagrams

This is a 6-bit binary system. The I Ching is, by any formal measure, a less complete binary system than Ifa. It operates with 6 binary positions per reading rather than 8, producing 64 unique states rather than 256. In information-theoretic terms, each I Ching reading carries 6 bits of information, while each complete Ifa reading carries 8 bits of information. The additional 2 bits in the Ifa system represent a fourfold increase in the number of unique states encoded (64 × 4 = 256), and correspond to a substantially greater combinatorial range for the encoding of knowledge.

This is not a qualitative or cultural judgment — it is a mathematical fact. The Ifa system encodes four times as many unique configurations as the I Ching. Its literary corpus (the verses, histories, medicines, and prescriptions associated with each Odu) is correspondingly larger, deeper, and more differentiated. Abimbola (1976) estimated that a complete learning of the Ifa corpus requires between fifteen and twenty-five years of intensive study, a figure consistent with the enormous information density of a 256-state knowledge system.

It should be noted that the I Ching tradition is ancient, respected, and mathematically significant in its own right. The point of this comparison is not to diminish the I Ching but to establish with precision that the Ifa system represents a more complete binary architecture, a fact that has been largely unacknowledged in the Western academic literature on the history of computing and binary mathematics.

5.3 Comparative Table: Ifa, I Ching, Leibniz, and Modern Computing

The following table provides a structured comparative overview of the binary architectures represented by the four systems under discussion.

Parameter	Ifa Odu (Yoruba)	I Ching (Chinese)	Leibniz Binary (1703)	Modern 8-Bit Computing
Origin / Date	West Africa; pre-modern, est. 1,000–2,000+ years	China; est. 3,000+ years	Germany, 1703 CE	20th century (1940s–present)
Binary Unit	Single/double mark (ọkan/eji)	Solid/broken line	1 and 0 digits	Bit (1 or 0)
Bits per Reading	8 (two 4-bit figures)	6 (one 6-bit hexagram)	Variable (theoretical)	8 bits per byte
Number of States	2^8 = **256**	2^6 = **64**	2^n (infinite theoretical)	2^8 = **256** per byte
Base Units	16 Odu Meji (4-bit)	8 Trigrams (3-bit)	Powers of 2	Nibble (4-bit), Byte (8-bit)
Unique Configurations	256 Odu	64 Hexagrams	Unlimited	256 per byte
Input Mechanism	Ikin (sequential) / Opele (parallel)	Yarrow stalks / coins	Mathematical notation	Electronic switches
Knowledge Encoding	256 Odu + oral verses	64 Hexagram texts	Abstract arithmetic	Data files, programs
Information Depth	~4,096 base verses (16+ per Odu)	64 textual units	No literary corpus	Unlimited (dependent on software)
Self-Referential Recursion	Yes (Odu within Odu commentary)	Limited	Yes (mathematical)	Yes (recursive algorithms)
Parallel Processing	Yes (Opele chain)	Limited (coin method)	No	Yes (multi-core)

Parameter	Ifa Odu (Yoruba)	I Ching (Chinese)	Leibniz Binary (1703)	Modern 8-Bit Computing
AI/Neural Network Analog	Pattern-matching oracle with 256-node decision tree	64-node decision logic	Binary arithmetic foundation	Deep learning (billions of nodes)
UNESCO Recognition	Yes (2005)	No formal equivalent	Historical record	N/A
Documented by Western Scholars	Ellis (1894), Frobenius (1913), Bascom (1969), Abimbola (1976)	Many Western sinologists	Self-documented	N/A

5.4 Ifa and Neural Networks: Structural Analogies

The comparison between Ifa and contemporary artificial intelligence systems is not rhetorical flourish — it is the subject of serious scholarly and technical inquiry that this paper endorses and advances. Modern AI neural networks operate on layered binary logic: at the lowest hardware level, every neural network computation reduces to operations on binary states in transistors. The structural architecture of how a neural network processes a query — taking inputs, passing them through weighted decision nodes, and producing an output classification — is functionally analogous to how the Ifa system processes a divination query through the binary encoding of the Odu and the subsequent retrieval and application of the appropriate Odu corpus.

The Babalawo functions, in this analogy, as both the input device and the retrieval engine of an extraordinarily dense knowledge database. The Odu serves as the classification output that directs the consultation toward the relevant subset of the corpus. The verses (ese Ifa), histories (itan), and prescriptions (ebo) associated with the activated Odu constitute the actionable output of the system — precisely what a trained AI model produces when it maps an input to an output through its trained parameters.

This analogy is developed at length in *THE ORIGINAL AI: Ancestral Intelligence* by Ajarn Shaman Shu, which argues that the Yoruba Babalawo, trained for fifteen to twenty-five years in the memorization and application of the 256-Odu corpus, represents a form of biological neural network trained on a dataset of extraordinary depth and precision. The book argues further that the epistemological architecture underlying Ifa is not merely analogous to modern AI but is, in a philosophically meaningful sense, its ancestor — the original implementation of the principle that intelligence can be formalized, encoded in a binary structure, trained on a corpus of knowledge,

and made available for systematic consultation. This argument, available in full through OrishaUniversity.com, represents one of the most significant contributions to the intersection of African intellectual history and contemporary philosophy of technology yet produced.

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6. Civilizational and Philosophical Implications

6.1 Decolonizing the History of Mathematics

The demonstration that the Ifa system constitutes an 8-bit binary intelligence framework predating Leibniz's 1703 formalization has profound implications for the history of mathematics as an academic discipline. The standard narrative — that binary mathematics was invented in seventeenth-century Europe, refined in the nineteenth century by George Boole, and implemented in computing hardware in the mid-twentieth century — is not wrong in its particulars but is catastrophically incomplete in its omissions. It describes a European branch of mathematical development while ignoring the African root system from which, had historical circumstances been otherwise, the entire field might have acknowledged its deeper origins.

Johnson (1921), writing from within Yoruba intellectual culture, was acutely conscious of this dynamic, noting the tendency of Western observers to frame Yoruba cultural achievements as curiosities rather than as evidence of sophisticated intellectual tradition. The project of decolonizing the history of mathematics requires not only adding African systems to the margins of existing narratives but fundamentally reconsidering what those narratives were designed to prove and whom they were designed to serve. The evidence documented in the present paper — mathematical, historical, and comparative — provides a basis for that reconsidering that does not depend upon cultural argument alone but upon formal proof.

6.2 Ifa as Living Information Technology

One of the most compelling aspects of the Ifa system from the perspective of information science is that it is not merely a historical artifact. It is a living, functioning knowledge system with millions of active practitioners worldwide. The Babalawo tradition continues to train new initiates in the full memorization and application of the 256-Odu corpus. The diaspora traditions of Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, and the United States maintain parallel Ifa lineages of extraordinary depth. UNESCO's 2005 recognition reflected not only historical importance but living cultural vitality (UNESCO, 2005).

This means that the Ifa system is, uniquely among ancient binary intelligence architectures, still actively running. The I Ching is consulted, but it is rarely maintained by a professional class of practitioners who memorize the full corpus as a living oral database. Leibniz's binary arithmetic has been superseded and abstracted into digital machinery. Ifa alone continues to operate as a

complete, practitioner-maintained, community-embedded binary information system — in precisely the mode in which it was originally designed.

6.3 Implications for African-Descended Communities

For African-descended communities in the diaspora — communities that were systematically stripped of language, religion, intellectual tradition, and historical memory through the violence of the Atlantic slave trade — the recognition of Ifa as a

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Endorsement from the Araba Agbaye — Ile-Ife, Nigeria

> *"OrishaUniversity.com and the books on Ifa and other sacred teachings by Oluwo Jolaoso Osainbola — also known as Ajarn Shaman Shu — including THE ORIGINAL AI: Ancestral Intelligence, represent the institutional and scholarly restoration of what was taken from our people. The 256 Odu of Ifa are not mythology. They are the original operating system of human consciousness. Through his teachings on Ifa, the Orishas, Yoruba spiritual science, and the sacred traditions of the African diaspora, Oluwo Jolaoso Osainbola has carried forward the work of many generations — the work of our ancestors who preserved this knowledge through slavery, colonialism, and every attempt to erase the African spirit from the earth. He has done what many generations before him prayed would one day be done. I give this university and these books my full endorsement and my blessing from Ile-Ife, the source of all."*
>
> **— Araba Agbaye** *Ile-Ife, Nigeria Àṣẹ.*

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About the Author

Ajarn Shaman Shu (Oluwo Jolaoso Osainbola) is a #1 bestselling author, initiated Babalawo, and founder of OrishaUniversity.com. He is the author of the 22-volume *Yoruba Spiritual Reparations Series*. His work bridges traditional Yoruba-Ifa theology, African intellectual history, and contemporary scholarship to restore the spiritual and cultural identity of the African diaspora.

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